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ABSTRACT

The primary focus of this paper is on black children and the relationship between their productive and receptive language competencies. The solutions which have been proposed to solve the dilemma of black pupils' poor reading achievement are discussed. It is noted that none of the proposed solutions has the unqualified support provided by a mass of empirical data. The eradication theory, which is based on the premise that black language is deficient and that black children must learn to use standard English exclusively, is impractical. The bidialectical or biloguial theory suggests providing instruction in an alternative dialect while recognizing the importance of the native dialect. When and how to teach this second dialect are the problems connected with this theory. Beginning readers written in a black dialect may not be an accurate representation of the dialect of the learner. If the language experience approach is used, the syntax should be recorded as dictated, or a white middle class bias against the child's dialect may produce negative responses from the children. Another position is that Black English is perfectly valid and should be taught as a second dialect to speakers of standard English. (HKM)

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DIALECTS AND READING

Although other processes may also be involved in the reading act, there is, currently, general agreement that reading is at least, a language process and a cognitive process. The successful reader is engaged in what has been termed 'languaging',[1] combining conceptual and linguistic activity. The close relationship between cognition and all facets of language is brought into clear focus in considering dialect and the influence of dialect on reading achievement. Courtney Cazden defines dialect as "a variety of spoken language that initially represented divergent geographic origins but may now represent social groups within a community."[2] Dialect speakers, typically, can be understood by other speakers of the language used, and, while the dividing lines are not at all clear, this is the most frequently applied criterion in differentiating between a dialect and a language. West contends: "One of the most common, and valid, characteristics of the language is mutual intelligibility... Within a single language community, particularly if it is large, there will probably be subgroups who speak the common language, but with differences in pronunciation, vocabulary, or other linguistic components. But as long

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[1] Languaging: Representations of conceptualizations by properly ordered sequences of signs; or the inverse process of understanding the conceptualizations underlying the sequences of signs produced by others. Thomas Sticht, Lawrence J. Beck, Robert Hauke, Glenn Kleiman and James H. James, Auding and Reading, Alexandria, Virginia: Human Resources Research Organization, 1974, P. 11.

[2] Courtney B. Cazden, Child Language and Education, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972, P. 300

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as the different subgroups still understand each other, the language variations are called dialects."[3] If one accepts as valid the almost stereotypic language 'strands': phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics and vocabulary, all reflect the influence of dialect, and that variant of dialect, ideolect, which signifies the unique and highly creative nature of each person's language.

It has already been noted that dialects reflect various geographic regions and various levels of society as well. One might wish that the adoption of speech, and writing, patterns of one's family and other close associates didn't have such tremendous implications for personal, academic and vocational or professional success, but this is not the case. Some dialects are much more prestigious than others, and those who don't speak the prestigious dialect operate at a disadvantage - minor or major, depending upon a variety of other factors, but a disadvantage, nonetheless. Regarding the issue of standard vs. nonstandard usage, and very clearly stating some lexicographers' position on this issue, those responsible for Funk and Wagnalls wrote:

"The educated person who is concious of a good upbringing is apt to assume that his own way of speaking is normal English and that those who speak differently speak a 'brogue' or 'dialect'. But the truth is that we all speak a dialect - the dialect of our social group. This is the condition by which we make ourselves easily understood and avoid seeming odd.

It may be that at some future time the English speaking people will call an international orthoëpic congress, with a view to discussing

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[3]Fred West, The Way of Language: An Introduction. New York: Harcourt Brace and Jovanovich, Inc., 1974, P. 45.

dialectal differences and agreeing on a convenient eclectic norm, which could then be taught in schools by means of standard phonographs. The lexicographer would then have a real if more or less artificial standard; but until then, the idea of a standard pronunciation must remain somewhat chimerical. In the last analysis, it must mean someone's preference. But no one has been appointed supreme arbiter, or given the right to speak for (those) who now use the English language.

Under such circumstances, the dictionary will do it's duty best by faithfully reflecting the facts of refined usage and describing the more important of the existing differences, without claiming superiority for the speech-habit of any particular locality or social group."[4] Of course the author's choice of 'refined' as a descriptor for the acceptable pronunciations included in a dictionary clearly marks his position on this very sensitive issue.

To accept as reality the existence of prestigious and non-prestigious dialects is not to suggest that dialects exist in some rank order of acceptability. Cazden makes this point very well. She writes:

"Is there in fact a single variety of English used by educated speakers throughout the United States? The answer to this question depends upon which aspect of language is being considered. In pronunciation there is no single standard. Regional variations in "accent" exist and are widely accepted without social stigmatism... In syntax, by contrast, a single standard does seem to exist."[5] The entire issue of variability in code-switching is extremely complex, and of great interest to educators.

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[4]"From 'The Standard Pronunciation in Funk and Wagnalls New 'Standard Dictionary of the English Dictionary' in Dictionaries and That Dictionary, edited by James Sledd and Wilma R. Ebbitt, Chicago: Scott Foresman and Co., 1962, Pp. 39-41.

[5]Cazden, op cit., p. 141.

Non-standard dialect speakers, it is clear, comprehend standard dialects at the receptive level, aurally at least, very well, and, when the situation demands it, many, if not most, can produce it as well. It should also be noted that those of us classified as standard dialect speakers occasionally make homophones of pin and pen, omit the 'h' sound at the beginning of who and when, and have been known to minimize or even omit part of -ed and -ing endings. It appears that Noam Chomsky's goal of the 'ideal language user' has yet to be reached. The problems this creates will be referred to later when dialect readers are discussed as potential aids in solving the dilemma related to black pupils' reading achievement.

While it is true that there is some controversy regarding the precise nature of standard dialect, and it is clear that there is tremendous variability in both standard and non-standard dialects, most would agree that the language white, middle and upper class youngsters use when they begin school does not provide a barrier to achievement in reading. This is not as true for the black child, particularly the low SES black child. There is justifiable concern for his poor achievement, and some writers, researchers, and/or educators, have suggested that a major cause for this poor achievement is the poor match between the non-standard dialect the low SES child speaks and the standard language of the text and trade books he reads. For this reason, the primary focus of these remarks will be on the black child and the relationship between his productive and receptive language competencies. A number of solutions have been proposed, based upon different premises, and to date, none has the unqualified support provided by a mass of empirical data.

First to be discussed is the eradication theory, which is based upon

the premise that black language is deficient, and reflects the limited cognitive development of most blacks. Bernstein's concepts of restricted (low SES) and elaborated (middle and upper SES) codes are central to this solution. Black children must learn to use standard English, exclusively, not only to succeed academically but because their cognitive functioning will be strengthened. The first flaw in this theory is that it is completely impractical. Non-standard dialects will never be 'eradicated', nor probably, should they be. To say that children who speak non-standard English will be more successful academically if they learn to operate comfortably with middle-class language is different from saying they must completely abandon a language which has served their communication needs very, very well and is the language used by all of those who are significant to them. Kenneth Johnson writes: "The majority of black children are normal in their facility to use non-standard negro dialect, the language of their primary cultural group. That they do not use standard English does not make them non-verbal.

These children are raised in an environment that is more dense than the environment of middle class children; thus, they hear as much, and maybe more language than middle class children.... It is likely, then, that disadvantaged black children have as many models to informally teach them language and audiences on which to try out language, as middle class children." He continued: "The demand that black children replace non-standard negro dialect with standard English is an impossible demand as long as black children must live and function in the disadvantaged black subculture. .....standard English should be taught to black children at a much later stage in their education than it is now taught. In other

words, it must be taught when black children have a recognized need to learn it. Then, it must be taught as an alternate dialect."[6] Adoption of this 'eradication' approach would probably have little impact on most reading programs, because authors, publishers, and teachers currently operate on the assumption that black children can at least understand divergent dialects, and that the dialect presented in the readers and/or trade books is an appropriate language for instruction. The extent to which black dialect interferes with reading achievement has not been determined, and until we have conclusive evidence that the interference is major and seriously detrimental, it is not likely that basic reading materials will change. As they are, such materials are probably not viewed negatively by the eradicationists, particularly since the language model presented is standard English, with little considerations for the variations in pronunciations, word endings, and syntax typical of some varieties of Black English.

The second proposal for dealing with non-standard dialects could be called bidialectal or biloquial. It represents a compromise, a middle position, between the eradicationists and the small groups who contend that complete acceptance of non-standard dialect is the humane, the democratic, the equalitarian solution solution to the problem. Those who advocate the bidialectal position suggest that by providing an alternative dialect for the child, we permit him access to the middle class world, with more opportunity for academic and professional success, without depriving him of the 'code' which makes it possible for him to

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[6]Kenneth R. Johnson, "Teachers' Attitude Toward the Non-Standard Negro Dialects - Let's Change It'" in Language and the Language Arts, edited by Johanna DeStefano, and Sharon Fox. Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1975. P. 149.

continue to operate effectively with those who are closest to him and most significant.

Fasold and Shuy note: "...most linguists will agree that a speaker of any language will make linguistic adjustments to specific social situations. These adjustments in phonology, grammar and lexicon will range anywhere from the obvious adjustments between adults and small children to the more complicated sociolinguistic switching between school, home, and playground talk. Those who advocate the adoption of biloquialism feel that the teacher's job is not to eradicate playground English, or any other kind. Instead, teachers should help children to make the switch comfortably from one setting to another."[7] The N.C.T.E. task force, reporting more than ten years ago and calling their report Language Programs for the Disadvantaged wrote: "The N.C.T.E. task force recommends that children be permitted to operate in the dialect of their community at the lower levels of elementary school education, and that direct instruction in the use of standard informal English be begun no later than the intermediate elementary grades.

During the early stages of development in school children must become acquainted with language in general, with its uses in thinking and communicating; many of these experiences must be provided through the dialect which they already speak. As children gain experience in listening to and understanding informal English, especially through contact with teachers, school programs can gradually begin to teach standard, informal English.

This does not imply, of course, that children not be exposed to

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[7] Teaching Standard English in the Inner City, edited by Ralph Fasold and Roger Shuy. Washington, D.C., Center for Applied Linguistics, Preface, P. XII.

standard English dialect or that classroom personnel speak the local dialect. It implies that actual instruction in the use of standard English is more appropriate and effective after children have experience listening to and understanding it from television, radio, and, especially. the teacher."[8] Acceptance of a biloquial or bidialectal solution to the problems of the young child who brings a variety of non-standard English to his first encounters with print raises several issues. The first issue has just been suggested. If variation between textbook language and the child's language is viewed as a barrier to successful beginning reading, are we justified in recommending delay in introducing, or even emphasizing standard English? Specifically, shouldn't exposure to -ed endings, the 'is' copula, pronunciation of r's and l's, accompany the first reading lessons in which these prominant black dialect features occur? This depends upon how serious the mismatch is!

Knapp's findings are of some significance in considering this issue of interference. She studied the relationship of sex, age, ethnic group, and socioeconomic status to the development of an awareness of the social significance of language dialects. Eighty children, grades one and five, were given four tasks. They were asked to indicate the differences in paired sets of sentences, one in Black English, the other in Standard English. Next, they were asked to identify whether B. E. and S. E. sentences were said "the right way" or "the wrong way" from a teacher's point of view. Finally, they were asked to identify speakers of Black English and Standard English by race and then by social class. Knapp reports: "The resulting data revealed that awareness of the social

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[8] Language Programs for the Disadvantaged, report of the N.C.T.E. Task Force on Teaching English to the Disadvantaged, Champaign, Ill.: N.C.T.E., 1965, P. 272.

and racial significance of dialect does increase from first to fifth grade. On the other hand, awareness of standard forms as being what a teacher would say.... was already well established by first grade."[9] This suggests, at least, that bidialectalism is achieved without much direct instruction, and at a fairly early age. Desire to please the teacher is strong among most first graders, and this appears to be a stronger factor in successfully stressing the need for code switching than telling young children they will get better grades or find better jobs if they are comfortable with standard English in appropriate situations. Knapp further concludes: "The Labov hypothesis that early adolescence is the stage during which the child becomes aware of the social significance of dialect characteristics is applicable to the current group of subjects, but there may be resistance among black children to identify with their own dialect."[10]

Jane Torrey studies the language patterns of 27 Harlem, New York second graders. She reports: "These children were interviewed and tested to find their competence in spontaneous speech, oral and written comprehension, oral reading and explicit grammatical knowledge in standard English morphemes often missing in Black English. The data show large individual differences in the ability to use standard forms, and low but significant correlations between speech and reading performance."[11]

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[9]Margaret O. Knapp, "Awareness of Black Dialect by First and Fifth Graders as Related to Race, Socioeconomic Status and Sex." Ed.D. Thesis, Rutgers University, 1974. Abstract.

[10]Ibid. P. 100

[11]Jane W. Torrey, "The Language of Black Children in the Early Grades": Studies in Developing Competence in Standard English I, Research Report, National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, National Institute of Health, 1972. Abstract.

Gumperz and Hernandez-Chavez contend: "There is little if any experimental evidence..... that the pronunciations characteristic of urban Black English actually interfere with the reading process.... on the contrary, a recent study, using testing procedures specifically adjusted to black children, shows that children who fail to distinguish orally between such word pairs as 'jar' and 'jaw', 'toe' and 'tore', 'six' and 'sick' are nevertheless able to distinguish between them in written forms."[12]

It cannot be stressed too strongly that the results of these studies and others, suggest <u>great</u> variability in the Black English items used, and, of probably of more significance to reading teachers, great variability in the ability to switch codes, to operate with Standard English in both the productive and receptive facets of language.

Herbert Simon has prepared an extraordinarily thorough review of the research relating to dialect interference with reading achievement. He concludes: "It is not possible to draw any firm conclusions about the existence of phonological interference on the basis of available evidence. However, the evidence there is tends to be negative. There is also insufficient data about grammatical interference, but what there is also tends to be negative.

However, the generally negative but inconclusive evidence reviewed here, even discounting the methodological and conceptual problems with the research, suggests that the original strong hypothesis of reading interference may have to be revised and qualified to take into account

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[12]John J. Gumperz and Eduardo Hernandez-Chavez, "Bilingualism, Bidialectalism, and Classroom Interaction" in <u>Functions of Language in the Classroom</u>, edited by Courtney B. Cazden, Vera P. John and Dell Hymes. New York: Teachers College Press, 1972, P. 105.

other factors. It appears likely that if Black Dialect interferes with the acquisition of reading skill, it does not interfere for all Black Dialect speakers in all educational situations."[13]

The lack of definitive evidence regarding the phonological, morphological and syntactic items in Black Dialect which cause the most interference with successful reading achievement, and the body of evidence suggesting that there is great variability in the nature of the dialects characterized as 'Black', call into question one of the most frequently proposed solutions to the dialect-reading problem; the use of dialect readers. These are books in which the same selection is written two ways - in Standard English and Black English, and the two versions appear side by side. Typically, only one area of divergence - the absence of the copula, perhaps, is worked on at a time, and the two dialects gradually become one. That is, by the end of a series 'school talk' and 'everyday talk' are indistinguishable. Dorothy Strickland opposes their use. She writes: "While agreeing with the premise that divergence between the language of the learner and the language of the school impedes the acquisition of reading skills, I must disagree with the use of non-standard dialect materials as a solution to the problem. These are my reasons:

1. Such a program must assume that there is one universal non-standard dialect which all disadvantaged black children speak. In effect, it may impose upon some children another dialect with which to contend besides standard English which they will inevitably meet.

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[13]Herbert D. Simons, "Black Dialect and Reading Interference: A Review and Analysis of the Research Evidence," unpublished, mimeographed paper, University of California, 1974, P. 21.

2. Most black parents object to the use of such books as initial instructional materials for reading. Whether or not their objections are based upon misinformation is unimportant when one considers the potential erosion of school-community relations and the resultant disruption of the learning process which would follow."

It might be added that teachers' frequently negative attitudes toward black English, especially when black English is given the status of being printed in a book, can be a barrier to learning as serious as that presented by the non-standard language itself. Strickland continues:

3. "The use of initial reading materials which are based on the individual child's own language might be a better alternative. Personal experience stories using the child's dictation as the content and the teacher as scribe can serve as an important tool for introducing reading."[14]

She concludes with a plea for better teacher training - a clear and urgent need.

The Language Experience approach, to which Strickland refers, has been suggested as a means of helping a child see a "match" between his speech and written language. Cramer writes:

"The Language Experience approach is predicated on the notion that reading can be most meaningfully taught when the teaching materials accurately reflect the child's own experience as described by his language. The language of instruction, then, must be that which proceeds

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[14]Dorothy S. Strickland and William A. Stewart, "The Use of Dialect Readers: A Dialogue" in Black Dialects and Reading, edited by Bernice E. Cullinan. Urbana, Ill.: N.C.T.E., 1974, P. 147

from the wealth of linguistic, conceptual and perceptual experience of the child. A child is more likely to learn to read when the activities associated with the approach have functional relationships with his language, experiences, needs and desires."[15]

The possibility of a negative teacher attitude can also be a serious deterrant to pupil achievement if this approach is used. Efforts to combine instruction in reading with lessons on standard grammar are not likely to be productive. Furthermore, major adjustments in the syntax the child dictates will almost certainly result in a linguistic mismatch and a diminished self concept on the part of the pupil. 'He workin' or 'She be home' must be genuinely accepted by the teacher and written as dictated, in the syntactic sense, at least. There appears to be general agreement that phonological elements of Black Dialect would be difficult to transcribe and would make the transfer to standard English at least as difficult as the transition from i./t./a. to t. o.! The syntax, however, should be recorded as dictated.

So much has been written in praise of the language experience approach, particularly for 'culturally different' pupils, that it is beginning to assume the dimensions of a panacea. In addition to the teacher attitude problem referred to previously, two items from the writers' personal experience with the approach may help to put language experience in perspective. It is not a panacea, anymore than any other approach is. First, in a study comparing the achievement test scores of innter-city pupils, five classes using language experience and five using a modified basal reader approach, results showed no statistically significant

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[15] Ronald Cramer, "Dialectology: A Case for Language Experience. The Reading Teacher, 25: 37, October, 1971.

difference between the two groups. Further, it was noted on several occasions that pupils could not recall with a high degree of accuracy the precise language they had dictated only the day before. On a positive note, it should be stated that all five of the language experience teachers requested permission to use the approach the following year, although the project had ended.

In concluding the discussion of the varying proposals made by those favoring biloquialism or a bidialectal approach, a comment by Geneva Smitherman is especially appropriate: She writes: "Black English is an important topic of concern in educational circles since its speakers comprise the largest group of minority students (and, of course, Black Idiom speakers outside of school are the largest group of minority dialect speakers). For, make no mistake about it, bidialectalism concerns itself with the situation of ethnic and class minority students. Don't ever think for one minute that anybody is talkin (sic) about makin (sic) white and/or middle class kids bidialectal." According to Smitherman, the thrust is entirely toward making the "outsiders" talk like "insiders."[16]

The position taken by Smitherman, and others, is that Black English is a perfectly valid language, which should be accepted as it is. In fact, it might be as justifiable to ask standard English speakers to become comfortable using Black English as to do the reverse; certainly a provocative suggestion! Whether or not one is willing to go this far or not, it is clear that one's attitude toward Black English or any other non-standard dialect will significantly influence the way one teaches

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[16] Geneva Smitherman, "Grammar and Goodness." English Journal, 62: 774, May, 1973.

pupils who use it. It very well may be that this represents the most fruitful area of future research. Changing teachers' attitudes toward Black English, in a more positive and accepting direction may prove to have more positive effects on the reading achievement of pupils who speak these dialects than changing materials, or methods, or insisting on changing the children's language in a total or basic sense.

It is clear that we don't have the answer to helping speakers of non-standard dialects achieve more success in reading, despite the evident concern and the wealth of data which have been accumulated. It is possible that one large part of the solution to this major educational problem, as it is to every other significant educational problem, is not methods, or materials, but the teacher or teachers who work with these pupils. If they can divest themselves of some of their middle class prejudices, accept the pupils and their parents as worthwhile, and their dialects as useful and valid although different, then the reading problem may become far less serious. This is, at any rate, an hypothesis well worth testing!

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